

## DUDE RANCH IN THE ROCKIES

By KLAUS MEHNERT

*In the imagination of the European and the Oriental, the American exists almost exclusively as a being continuously in the throes of work and worry to produce dollars. To a certain extent this is justified, for, ever since the arrival of the first Puritans in America, the emphasis in American life has been on work and money-making. More recently, however, one can perceive a growing understanding for the importance of relaxation of mind and body. As in many other spheres, America has created its own forms of recreation, some of which differ widely from those familiar to us in Europe or Asia.*

*Never before has it been so important for the rest of the world to understand the complicated nature of the American, made up of many contradictions. This understanding is aided by a knowledge of the American at play and of the various forms of his entertainment, such as football and bridge, soda fountains and movies, crossword puzzles and university summer sessions, "let's go for a ride," Coney Island, vacations in National Parks, auto camps, and dude ranches. The author believes that the peculiarity of American recreation and vacation is based on four main factors: the enormous size of the country, the automobile, a certain amount of Wild West romanticism in the hearts of most Americans, and the desire to "do things" even when relaxing.*

### WHAT IS A DUDE?

"Over there," said the driver of the bus, whose only occupant I was, "where the edge of the forest makes a sharp corner, you can see the smoke of your dude ranch." He pointed with his gloved hand toward the mighty mountain range which suddenly appeared before us as we emerged from the rocky canyon. We were now driving along a plateau over 6,000 feet high and surrounded by giant snow-capped mountains. The cool air was good to feel after the long day in the hot wheat plains. Ten minutes later we reached the terminus of the bus line, which was at the same time the end of the main road. A Ford belonging to the ranch was waiting for me, and after another twenty minutes on a bumpy and steeply rising road we stopped in front of the dude ranch.

For years I had been hearing of this new American institution which had

rapidly spread all over the country, and I was curious to see what life on a dude ranch was really like. A "dude ranch" is a place where city-dwelling Americans have, for some days or weeks, a chance to behave like cowboys and get some real exercise. "Dude" is an American slang word and means, according to Webster, "a dandy, a fop, an Easterner or city-bred person," and "fop" in turn, as I learned from the same source, stands for "a silly person, a coxcomb." It takes a country with a good sense of humor to make a place with as derogatory a name as "dude ranch" a successful tourist attraction.

What little I had heard about dude ranches led me — like probably most other Europeans — to expect something false, affected, and ridiculous. So, when on my last vacation trip in the West I heard of the existence of a dude ranch in the neighboring mountains, I decided to take a look at the place.

### "WE ARE VERY INFORMAL"

And now I had arrived. In the twilight I saw before me a large, one-storied house built of unhewn logs on the edge of a magnificent fir-forest. Around a huge fir standing alone right in front of the house there were long chairs and a pingpong table. The Ford sounded its horn. A white-coated servant (a college student, as I later discovered, who was working here during his summer vacation) came trotting from behind the house and took charge of my baggage. The young mistress of the house came briskly out onto the porch. In her smart riding clothes, tall, slim, sure of herself, moving with freedom and confidence, she came very close to the American ideal of feminine beauty as it has been created by Hollywood and cigarette advertisements, only healthier and less affected.

"Dr. Mehnert? We have been expecting you. Welcome to the ranch. My husband had to drive into town. I am Mrs. Garrett, but everyone calls me Linda. Do you mind if I call you Klaus? We are very informal here on the ranch."

I stammered my approval, and she showed me my room. It was simple, its walls of rough logs with cracks through which the evening breeze came in, but provided with every comfort and furnished with good taste.

Then Linda led me into the lounge. Meanwhile night had fallen. In a large open fireplace a bright fire was crackling, its light thrown upon my fellow dudes, upon the walls hung with antlers and pictures of horses and mountain scenery, and upon several bearskins on the floor.

"We have a new guest," Linda announced, and mentioned my name. "Klaus," she turned to me, "I want you to meet the others: that's Emily, Joe, Marjorie, Jean . . ." and so on till she had introduced me to all thirty of them. All were wearing cowboy outfits, even the women—riding pants, the high-heeled boots typical of the American cowboy and rather uncomfortable

for walking, gayly colored blouses, and neckerchiefs knotted in front. On the grand piano lay a pile of wide-brimmed hats. The guests were lounging around in a comfortable, lazy mood. They had just had supper, and most of them had not long returned from a strenuous day's riding in the mountains. Some were playing cards, one group stood at the piano singing old cowboy songs, but most of them had made themselves comfortable in the easy chairs by the fire.

### MY FELLOW DUDES

By bed-time I had more or less of an idea of the sort of people my "colleagues" were. Like everywhere else in the USA, when it is a question of vacations and traveling, the feminine element predominated. The ratio was about 5:2. Most of the men were married and were on the ranch with their wives and some with their children, while the women were mostly working bachelor-girls spending two or three weeks of their annual vacation up here. They were all from big cities lying within a radius of about five hundred miles of the ranch. One of the women was a journalist, another a doctor, two were nurses, and the rest mostly teachers and secretaries. It was all a harmless, jolly crowd in that pleasant evening mood people enjoy who feel that the day has been well-spent in physical exertion. It was a mood I had known, for example, as a student on evenings in Bavarian ski huts. The conversation was concerned exclusively with the events of the day, the horses, and the plans for the next day. On a list hung up on the wall everyone entered his wishes for the following day. When someone tuned the radio in to the news and the voice of the announcer brought the war in Europe for a few moments into the room, protests were raised: "Turn it off, we are here on a vacation. No politics!" A movement of the dial, and the announcer was silenced. Dance music filled the room, and the conversation of the guests was turned once again to the pros and cons of the various horses.

### HAPPY RIDING

These were the people with whom I spent the next few days. We began the day, according to American custom, with a tremendous breakfast. The mountain air and physical activity made us hungry. Milk, eggs in every possible form, ham, pancakes, porridge, fruit, fruit-juice—all this and more was devoured by the ravenous dudes. After breakfast we strolled over the fields to the corral, chatted with the real cowboys, caught our horses, and saddled them. All the different desires of the dudes were taken into account: some wanted to go for a whole day's ride—they were given a cowboy who rode along as a guide, and an extra horse to carry food; others were passionate fishermen and had to have a cowboy to show them a good fishing-stream and to carry the fishing tackle; a couple of men went shooting, and others again wanted to be back for lunch.

On one occasion we went for a two-days' ride to a lake high up in the mountains. There were eleven of us—the cowboy guide, seven women, and three men, with fourteen horses, as three were needed to carry sleeping-bags, provisions, and cooking equipment. It was a strenuous ride, all day in the saddle, on narrow mountain paths leading over rocks and canyons, and now and then a level stretch where we could canter. The night at the lake was crystal-clear and frosty, and lying on the stony ground was hard and uncomfortable. Had these young people been forced to spend a night under these conditions, they would have been highly indignant at such a dastardly attack upon their human rights. But since it was a part of their vacation, they enjoyed it as a great lark, with much laughter and unfaltering good humor. The girls showed far more spirit than one would have expected from them had one met them in their home-town in all their finery and make-up. Some of them had never been on a horse before, but in spite of aches and pains the first day they took part in everything, not only without complaints but with genuine enthusiasm.

### "ROUGHING IT"

This longing for the hard and primitive life, this pleasure in "roughing it" lies deep in nearly all Americans, a heritage from their ancestors who only a few decades ago were advancing in their covered wagons into territory that had never before been cultivated. This does not only apply to young people. It is to be found in all ages and both sexes. However, two generations of a high standard of living have accustomed city-bred Americans to certain demands of civilization, such as plentiful food, hot water, modern plumbing, etc., to such a degree that they would find it hard to do entirely without them. The dude ranches offer that very mixture of "roughing it" and civilization which the American desires for his vacation. Moreover, it satisfies his romantic longing to be a cowboy or a ranger and to find himself as it were transplanted back into the great period of America, into the time when the Wild West was conquered by the pioneers and their herds of cattle, the time of battles with the Indians and with bandits—in short, into an atmosphere which for generations has fascinated even German youngsters more than any other phase of history.

For many nations, wars are the greatest memories of their past. This I believe is not the case with Americans. The War of Independence is too far away, the Civil War too sad to remember, and of the Great War they think with mixed feelings. The part of their history that fills Americans with the greatest pride is the Conquest of the West. They thrill at the thought of covered wagons on the Oregon trail, of Kit Carson's scouting and General Custer's last stand. How much more thrilling to view from the saddle the magnificence and grandeur of this very West and to remember the exciting events that happened in this canyon or on the shores of that lake.

Anyone who has lived in the USA has felt the stores of vigor and strength in her youthful, buoyant



people. For this, the finest characteristic of the American, the pioneer period offered an extraordinary opportunity. It gave purpose, meaning, and satisfaction to his life. Since then times have changed. The frontiers have been reached. The Conquest of the West as chief problem of the nation has been replaced by the much less exciting tasks of conquering unemployment, of restoring fertility to once abundant and now drought-ridden lands, of preparing for war against a nation which lives thousands of miles away across an ocean.

### *ADULTS AT PLAY*

The American now finds an outlet for his vitality in the rough and hardy forms of his play and recreation; and nowhere is he offered a more ideal playground than on a dude ranch. He is aided in his enjoyment by another of his characteristics: his lack of inhibitions as we would have them. Most Europeans would consider it ridiculous and in bad taste and it would make them uncomfortable to dress up and pretend to be something they are not. (For many years one of the standard characters of German cartoons was the Berlin snob in the mountains dressed up like a drawing room Tyrolean.) In this matter the American is more unsophisticated. When, as little boys in Germany, we stuck feathers on our heads to become Indians or were transformed into medieval knights by wearing paper helmets, we really were Indians or knights and did not feel at all ridiculous. The same thing happens to the grown-up American when he plays at cowboys. He does not feel ridiculous in a costume that his father still wore in all seriousness, nor does he feel uncomfortable when the farmers he meets on his rides greet him with "Hello, dude!"

### *DUDE RANCHING WILL GROW*

The only possible limit to the development of dude ranches are the

prices; however, these show a tendency to decrease. When the first dude ranches came into fashion, only the rich could afford to stay there. There are still such ranches to be found today, with polo fields and golf courses and landing fields for private planes. Later on dude ranches for the middle classes came into existence, at first only a few, but soon more and more. I paid \$45 a week for my room at the ranch, while others, living in tents scattered in the forest and belonging to the ranch (roughing it!), within a few steps of comfortable log-cabin washrooms with hot showers, paid \$35. That is not much in America, where even a modest back room in a city hotel, without breakfast, costs \$1.50 a night. The best thing about the dude ranch is that it is not a "gyp-joint." Everything is included in the \$35 or \$45: three enormous meals a day, service, horses at every hour of the day or night, guides, the use of the ranch car for drives into town, etc. I actually did not spend a cent over the price agreed upon.

Most dude ranches are located in the classic country of the Wild West, the Rocky Mountains, and I predict a successful future for them. In the travel folder of one single state, Arizona, I found a hundred and six of them listed, with prices ranging from \$20 to \$100 a week. Many ranchers have realized that by taking in dudes they can have two crops a year: calves in the spring and dudes in the summer. Lately the Wyoming State University has even introduced courses on dude ranching. At the same time the number of dudes is rapidly increasing; they now amount to tens of thousands every season. This number will continue to grow, for there is a lot of truth in the old crack that "the average American grows up in the country, works like mad to be able to move into the city where he works like mad to make enough money to be able to move back to the country."